Say It with Masks

Express yourself through masks. Make sense of your world by assembling random objects into something meaningful.

Art is a form of therapy. As Picasso said, everything we make is a self-portrait. Making masks pulls us into an imaginary world—where we can exaggerate, emphasize, and poke fun at what may be a difficult in the real world.

Kathy and Jeff London came of age when art therapy was emerging as a practice, offering the possibility to move beyond real-world issues through imagination. Here's one of their exercises, which uses masks to reflect the challenges of life.

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Easing interaction

Masks make it easier to speak about situations that can take our breath away. Each person makes two masks and then lets the masks do the talking.

- **Your public mask.** This mask protects you like a totem animal. It may be what you project to the world, or what you hope people see you as.
- **Your private mask.** This mask reveals your hidden dreams, inner world, unspoken emotions, voices in your head, and symbols of your personal truth.

This exercise works best with a group of eight to twenty people. The creation can run for 10–20 hours, while the theatrical experience can be an hour or much more. It's great for teens figuring out their identity but can be adapted for any age.

Making your masks

You will be working with found objects. You'll also need glue guns, cardboard, and basic tools. You can get inspired by the artwork of Damselfrau, Kimmy Cantrell, and Noah Williams.

1. **Collect materials.** Gather objects from your surroundings that call to you: packaging, fabric scraps, wire, bottle caps, bark, shells, keys, broken jewelry, bits of text, or stuff from your kitchen drawer.
2. **Mask structure.** Create the underlying base that you can place on your head. Use what you like—perhaps cardboard, egg cartons, a fabric bag, plaster gauze, or papier-mâché. Make sure you can wear it, and that it's strong enough to support whatever you build upon it.
3. **Add layers.** Thinking about your outer and inner worlds, attach the larger objects to your masks. Think big. Horns? Branches? An upstairs? This superstructure will support your stories.
4. **Symbolic contrasts.** Add layers that combine opposites to express hidden tensions—soft/hard, natural/synthetic to hint at the complexity of identity—not just what's hidden, but how we protect or disguise it.
5. **Final embellishment.** Illustrate your two very different stories. Attach smaller bits to show your outward or inward face. Finish it off with painted colors, patterns, symbols, and textures that embody your concept.

Masks tell their stories

1. **Ease into it.** Sitting in a circle, wearing your outer masks, each person turns to their neighbor and shares one thing about their own mask, and one thing they notice about the other's mask.
2. **Go public.** Two volunteers stand and let their masks act out what they're protecting from each other. As the spirit moves people, new actors join in and others return to their seats. Interaction is encouraged, but watching is also therapeutic.
3. **Invite inner worlds.** If someone is willing to put on their private dream mask, they describe what they would need from the group to make them feel comfortable doing so. Another player does the same. With agreement from the group to fulfill the conditions, the two players enter the circle and act out a scene where they remove their outer mask and put on their inner mask. Others who wish to do the same may take their turns.
4. **Notice each other's inner world.** Wearing inner masks, turn to a new neighbor and tell them what you see in the other's mask. They respond with how it feels to be noticed. Next, reverse roles.

Share your story

When you look into the eyes of your masks, what do they tell you about yourself? What is true? Misleading? Emerging? What is revealed by not showing? What do your two masks have in common? What sets them apart from each other?

Give your mask a *title* and *description* that captures its story. Note any observations you have on *identity, belonging, transformation, resilience,* or the *group experience.*

Art tells the inner story